

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 21

NEW YORK TIMES
14 March 1986

U.S. Says France Missed Chance To Seize Beirut Hijacking Suspect

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 13 — American officials say the French Government recently missed an opportunity to arrest a Lebanese Shiite who has been accused of masterminding the hijacking of a Trans World Airlines jetliner last year.

The officials said France was asked to detain and prosecute the Lebanese Shiite, Imad Mughniyah, late last year after American intelligence officials learned that he was planning to enter France. They said they believed the terrorist suspect was spotted by French agents, but not arrested.

"This was an opportunity lost," an American official said.

French Seeking Hostages' Release

Reagan Administration officials said the French decision not to make the arrest was probably based on France's continuing diplomatic effort to gain the release of four French hostages in Lebanon. The failure of that effort so far, despite several concessions, underscores the difficulty facing the United States as it tries to negotiate the release of six Americans missing in Lebanon and believed to be held by a Shiite group, Islamic Holy War.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State George P. Shultz told a Senate subcommittee today that he endorsed the use of "moderate force" by the United States to abduct and bring before American courts suspects in terrorist attacks in which Americans abroad are killed or wounded.

The American officials said Mr. Mughniyah planned and directed the hijacking last June 14 of T.W.A. Flight 847, an incident in which three gunmen beat and then shot a United States

Navy diver, Robert Dean Stethem. The gunmen then held 39 Americans hostage for 17 days in Lebanon.

Mr. Mughniyah was also implicated in the bombing in 1983 of the French and American barracks in Beirut that left nearly 300 people dead. The officials described him as an associate of Abu Nidal, the leader of a terrorist group said to have organized a series of recent attacks at European airports.

President Reagan pledged last year that the terrorists behind the T.W.A. hijacking would be brought to justice. Last July arrest warrants were issued for three suspects, identified in court documents as Mohammed Hammadei, Ali Atwa and Hassan Izz-al-Din.

Mr. Mughniyah was also charged in the case, but the court papers were put under seal. "He was the brain of the T.W.A. hijacking," an official familiar with the case said.

Mr. Mughniyah's involvement in the hijacking has not been previously disclosed. But late last month the French press reported that the French Govern-

ment knew of his visit to the country and did not act. Interior Minister Pierre Joxe denied those reports as "contemptible lies."

The French effort to negotiate the release of their four hostages has been going on for several months and has been stepped up on the eve of the national legislative elections on Sunday. It has not been successful.

In Beirut today, however, the French mediator who is trying to gain the release of French hostages reported progress in his negotiations.

This month Shiite groups in Lebanon took four new French hostages and announced they had killed one of the previous French hostages. The death has not been confirmed.

Reagan Administration officials said there were several possible reasons for the failure to arrest Mr. Mughniyah.

'Cooperative Effort' Urged

France has traditionally been opposed to extradition if the offense involved can be construed as political. The French have previously refused to return to the United States fugitives being sought on charges growing from terrorist activity and have pointed out that in several instances, American

judges have refused to turn over members of the Irish Republican Army to Britain on the same grounds.

American officials have repeatedly said cooperation among nations is an important weapon in the fight against terrorism. "Without a viable, comprehensive cooperative effort, terrorism and its supporters will benefit from the uncoordinated actions of its victims," concluded a report last month by Vice President Bush's task force on combating terrorism.

In this instance, Administration officials say, the French actions appear to be linked to diplomatic maneuvering to win the release of hostages.

According to accounts appearing in the French press, a deal for the release of the four hostages was set for January but came undone at the last moment.

American officials note that France has been willing to go much further than the United States in offering to make deals with the shadowy Shiite groups in Lebanon that have held the French and American hostages.

"They've done everything we didn't think they should, and it hasn't worked," an Administration official said.